

## **New Mexico's Severe Drought and Fire Danger Requires Everyone's Involvement**

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As we looked for metaphors to describe our state's drought and the danger from wildfires this year, we agreed the term 'tinderbox' is an understatement. Literally all of New Mexico is facing a challenging fire season – in our grasslands right now and coming soon to our forests. We're talking all areas of the State, and we are especially concerned about communities within grasslands and forested areas.

This year is exceptional: we're dealing with a mixture of severe drought, high temperatures and abundant fire fuels (grasses, shrubs and trees). Some people are likening this unprecedented situation to a perfect storm. We've already had 182 wildfires reported in New Mexico since the first of the year, more than twice the 25-year average; the fires have burned almost 200,000 acres, nearly four times the 25-year average.

The bottom line is we can't do business as usual this year. We must coordinate all of our efforts at the Federal, State and local levels, and we are working to ensure this happens.

At the Federal level, both the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management have received national severity funding. We are increasing coordination between agencies under our supervision and are supplementing resources. We are also bringing in and prepositioning additional firefighting crews and equipment, including helicopters, fire engines and an air tanker stationed in Albuquerque.

Based on studies of tree rings, many researchers are saying we're in a 15-year (or more) drought and so far we're only about half way through (or less). Last year notwithstanding we're seeing record low levels of plant and soil moisture and record high temperatures for this time of year (and even record-high soil temperatures). But thanks to a wet year in 2005 we now have abundant (but dry) grasses and shrubs. Add all this to long-term forecasts that tell us not to expect much precipitation through early June, and to quote astronaut Jim Lovell, "Houston, we have a problem."

You can see it just looking out the car window. Vegetation is stressed. Dust is everywhere. Some cacti are actually dying due to the lack of moisture.

In terms of fire, there are four key elements that drive wildfires: weather, fuels, topography and 'ignition sources,' such as lightning and a long list of human sources, including matches, cigarettes and fireworks. While we cannot control the first three factors, we can all work to eliminate many of the causes of fires started by people.

One thing all of us can do is use a hefty dose of common sense when it comes to fire danger. Drivers should never throw a lighted cigarette out of a vehicle, of course. There are many other situations where you can help. One of them is to avoid driving through tall grass or parking on grass that comes in contact with the under frame of a vehicle; catalytic converters can start grass fires, which can spread very quickly with a good wind.

People who haul trailers should make sure their wheel bearings are greased and that chains don't drag, sparking the pavement. Off highway vehicle users should check that spark arresters on OHVs and other internal combustion engines are working properly. Spark arresters in chainsaws, portable generators and lawn mowers must also be working properly.

People in urban areas living on the edge of the great outdoors can do several things to protect their property from fire. For example, remove or trim dead grasses and shrubs within 30 feet of structures; remove buildups of tumbleweeds from fence lines or windrows within 100 feet of structures; keep all firewood and building materials at least 30 feet away from structures; and keep vegetation trimmed and cleared away from propane tanks.

A little work now will make a big difference over the long run!

For further information on fire prevention techniques, you can call a toll-free number at 1-877-864-6985 or go to [gacc.nifc.gov/swcc/index.htm](http://gacc.nifc.gov/swcc/index.htm) on the web. Starting in April we will have this interagency toll-free number staffed by people who can help you with questions about prevention techniques and other information, such as fire restrictions, areas closed to fire danger, areas open for recreation, etc.

The Forest Service, State Forestry Division and BLM will also be flying and posting 'red flag' warnings when severe fire weather events will be occurring. This will be yet another reminder of severe fire conditions – and it will be the time to use wildfire prevention techniques!

**'Do Your Part, Don't Let a Wildfire Start'** is the slogan adopted for New Mexico's Wildfire Awareness Week in 2006, a joint effort of the New Mexico State Forestry Division, the BLM and the Forest Service. It will be observed from March 26 to April 1 and will be kicked off on March 23 in Albuquerque. Visit the BLM's website at [www.nm.blm.gov](http://www.nm.blm.gov) for further information and be sure to look for locally sponsored events.

This year we're facing some historic fire prevention challenges. All of us must work together to meet them. We invite you to join us.